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Family in an Interior

Jan Steen
(Leiden 1626 – 1679 Leiden)

ca. 1663
oil on panel
32.3 x 25.7 cm
signed in dark paint, lower left: “JSteen” (JS in ligature)
JS-114

How to cite

Hardy, Katherine Gobel. “Family in an Interior” (2026). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/family-in-an-interior/ (accessed November 26, 2026).

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In this quiet domestic scene, Jan Steen visualized the mundane duties of childcare in a moment of collaborative parenting.[1] A father, with his oversized cap set askew, squints his eyes, bares his teeth in a grin, and prepares to cover or clothe his bare-bottomed child, while the mother, in an elegant blue jacket, patiently assists by holding up the child in her arms. Their home is simple but well kept, indicative of the family's comfortable middle-class status. An earthenware porridge pot on the table, covered with a tablecloth, suggests that the child has just been fed. On the walls hang several household objects: a pair of bellows for a fire, new candles, a slotted spoon, and, in a niche, an oil lamp and a corked bottle. The child, whose arms are wrapped around the mother's neck, gazes back toward the father with a slight smile.

Familial scenes, particularly those prominently featuring child-life imagery, were among Steen's favorite subjects; he made many pictures of holiday celebrations and children playing, as well as visualizations of the Dutch proverb "As the old sing, so pipe the young," a humorous lesson about the inevitability of passing learned traits from generation to generation.[2] For Steen, themes of childrearing and children's social lives were often ripe for situational comedy, particularly from 1660 to 1670 during his tenure in Haarlem, where artists such as Adriaen van Ostade (1610–84), Dirck Hals (1591–1656), Jan Miense Molenaer (1610–68), and Judith Leyster (1609–60) were similarly interested in humorous childhood scenes.

Steen's relatively rough handling of paint in the execution of this picture—evident, for instance, in the visible brushstrokes on the child's sleeve—supports the painting's dating to his Haarlem period and indicates the influence of Haarlem artists. While Steen was known to vary his choice of rough or fine brushstrokes for different subjects throughout his career, the more expressive style seen here is typical of these years, during which he also executed his most inventive family-related pictures.

The question of Steen's comic intentions in this charming picture, however, remains open. The scene does not, for instance, deploy the type of crude, scatological comedy found in a Dresden painting by Adriaen Brouwer (1605–38) depicting a peasant father wiping his child's exposed bottom **(fig 1)**. Put off by the stench, the father turns his head away, scrunches his nose and eyes, and purses his lips. Brouwer's vivid picture is probably an allegorical depiction of Smell from a now-lost series of the Five Senses.[3] The motif of diaper changing, most often featuring mothers, can also be found in some indecorous comic genre pictures as well as in an emblem in the book *Emblemata en Zinnewercke* (1624) by Johan de Brune (1588–1658), illustrated by Adriaen van de Venne (1589–1662), with the caption, "This life, what is it, but stink and dung?" **(fig 2)**.[4] Decades later, the classicist Gerard de Lairesse (1641–1711) denounced the inclusion of similar offensive subject matter in genre

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Adriaen Brouwer, *A Father's Unpleasant Duties (Smell)*, ca. 1631, oil on panel, 20 x 13 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, inv. no. 1057.



Fig 2. Adriaen van de Venne, *Dit lijf, wat ist, als stanck en mist?* (This life, what is it, but stink and dung?), engraving, emblem no. 3 in Johan de Brune, *Emblemata en Zinnewercke* (Amsterdam, 1624), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. KOG-ZG-1-30-96.



Fig 3. Adriaen van Ostade, *Father Feeding His Child*, 1648, etching, 125

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pictures, explicitly naming offenders like Brouwer and Molenaer and calling out imagery he deemed unsuitable for paintings, such as "nasty children sitting in a potty chair."[5]

Steen's *Family in an Interior*, by contrast, does not seem to represent the unpleasant smells of baby cleaning but instead represents more sanitized aspects of childcare. It is unclear whether the rich blue cloth held by the father is a form of swaddling or a blanket or an item of clothing; yet, as a depiction of a mother and father performing the daily tasks of feeding, cleaning, clothing, or warming their child, the painting may be considered an exemplary image of dutiful parenting, a model to be followed. Indeed, the subject matter of familial harmony is not unlike Steen's several depictions of pious families praying before a meal, such as the example in The Leiden Collection.

In his particular focus on the father's role, Steen was likely also influenced by Van Ostade's depictions of humble peasant families, such as his engraving from 1648 **(fig 3)** of a smiling father seated by a fireplace, spoon-feeding a baby while the mother dries the laundry.[6] By reimagining Van Ostade's example in a painting like this one, Steen updated the imagery of the *pater familias* type from the peasant setting to a well-kept interior, an adaptation befitting later seventeenth-century tastes for more refined domestic spaces.[7] Steen featured spoon-feeding in other genre pictures, too, including his painting in Dresden **(fig 4)** of a mother attempting to feed a baby from a pot that resembles the one in the present work.[8] For contemporary audiences of parents, one may well imagine the appeal of a relatable scene of childcare in a tidy domestic setting like that of *Family in an Interior*.[9]

On the other hand, Steen's iconographic choices in this picture might simultaneously be read as comic.[10] The father, with his less-than-elegant facial features and toothy grin, wears a hat that could be interpreted as a *kraamheerenmut*, a celebratory new father's cap, similar to the one depicted in Steen's *Celebrating the Birth* **(fig 5)** in the Wallace Collection.[11] In that picture, the man behind the "new father" with the hat makes a two-finger "V" gesture, revealing him to be a cuckold.[12] In *Family in an Interior*, elements including the unused pair of bellows and unlit candles and oil lamp may likewise suggest sexual ineptitude or lack of romance.[13] Yet, the quietude and general propriety of the scene make this interpretation hardly conclusive. Steen perhaps left the moral implications of the picture intentionally ambiguous, allowing the scene, with its comic clues, to pose an unanswered question. As with many of his pictures, Steen has dropped the viewer into the middle of the action, allowing his narrative to hang in the balance.

Steen further demonstrated his ability to humorize the subject of early parenting in another painting—which is now sadly lost and known only through copies such as one

x 90 mm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 51.501.487.



Fig 4. Jan Steen, *Mother and Child*, ca. 1660s, oil on panel, 29.2 x 24.5 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, inv. no. 1726.



Fig 5. Jan Steen, *Celebrating the Birth*, 1664, oil on canvas, 89 x 109 cm, The Wallace Collection, London, inv. no. P111.



Fig 6. Follower of Jan Steen, *An Interior with Three Children Playing with a Cat*, n.d., oil on panel, 55 x 45.5 cm, private collection, previous sale, Sotheby's, New York, 14 October 2020, no. 132. Image courtesy of Sotheby's, Inc. © 2025

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sold at Sotheby's in 2020 **(fig 6)**—of three children attempting to feed and clothe or swaddle a cat, playacting the activities of adults.[14] In the scene, a girl, acting as mother, restrains a bonnet-wearing cat and tries to feed it with a spoon while two boys, pseudo-fathers, prepare to wrap the cat in a blue cloth, just like the father in *Family in an Interior*. Steen's inventive adaptations of childcare thus extend to multiple comic strategies and interpretive possibilities. His focus on the world of children offered ample opportunities to convey intricate family dynamics, the trials of parenting, and the propensities and emotions of children.

- Katherine Gobel Hardy, 2026

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Endnotes

1. Wouter Kloek's extensive writings on Jan Steen's "household" and the varied roles children play in his art have greatly inspired my own research, and Kloek's observations are reflected throughout this entry. They have also been instrumental for my doctoral dissertation, "Child's Play in Jan Steen's Paintings" (Columbia University, 2026). Among Kloek's many insights, I have taken to heart his pithy comment that children in Steen's paintings often serve as "commentators on the absurdity of the world." Wouter Kloek, *Jan Steen (1626–1679)* (Amsterdam, 2005), 89.
2. The written proverb, "Soo de Ouden Songen, Soo Pijpen de Jongen," appears in several of Steen's depictions of the subject, including in the Mauritshuis version, where it is visible on the sheet music held by the grandmother. Jan Steen, *"As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young,"* ca. 1668–70 (Mauritshuis, The Hague).
3. This depiction of Smell is similar to Jan Miense Molenaer's version showing a mother, far less dramatic than the father in Brouwer's, cleaning a baby's bottom over her lap: Jan Miense Molenaer, *The Five Senses: Smell*, 1637 (Mauritshuis, The Hague). The five paintings in Molenaer's series, all in the Mauritshuis, are in the same half-length format and feature a few figures seated or standing around the end of a table or barrel.
4. The emblem reads, in Dutch: "Dit lijf, was ist, als stanck en mist?" Johan de Brune, *Emblemata en Zinnewercke* (Amsterdam, 1624), 17, emblem III. Another example of a mother changing a baby can be found, for instance, in Gerrit Dou, *The Quacksalver*, 1652 (Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam).
5. Gerard de Lairesse, *Het Groot Schilderboek* (Amsterdam,1707), 1: 171 ("besmeurde Kinders in de kakstoel"), 174.
6. See Nanette Salomon, "Domesticating the Peasant Father: The Confluent Ideologies of Gender, Class, and Age in the Prints of Adriaen van Ostade," in *Images of Women in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art: Domesticity and the Representation of the Peasant*, ed. Patricia Phagan (exh. cat. Athens, Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia) (Athens, 1996), 50, no. 8.
7. On the transition of tastes in genre subjects from peasant scenes to more refined interiors, see Junko Aono, *Confronting the Golden Age: Imitation and Innovation in Dutch Genre Painting, 1680–1750* (Amsterdam, 2015), 26–42.
8. As Mary Frances Durantini points out, the Dresden picture—recalling the format and subject matter of Holy Family scenes like Gerard David's *The Virgin and Christ Child with Milk Soup*, ca. 1515 (Galleria di Palazzo Bianco, Genova), and many related versions—may be considered a secularized version of such sacred images showing the everyday trials of coaxing a baby to accept a spoonful of food. Mary Frances Durantini, *The Child in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Ann Arbor, 1983), 39.
9. Additionally, it has been suggested that Steen also alluded to religious iconography in relation to this

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picture, namely that the motif was borrowed from a print after Maerten de Vos, *Clothing the Naked*, from series of *The Seven Acts of Mercy*, published by Gerard de Jode in the 1580s. Jasper Hillegers, in *Salomon Lilian: Old Masters*, by Jasper Hillegers, Peter C. Sutton, and Wendela Wagenaar-Burgemeister (Amsterdam, 2015), 77, no. 14n4.

10. See the entry by Jasper Hillegers, in *Salomon Lilian: Old Masters*, by Jasper Hillegers, Peter C. Sutton, and Wendela Wagenaar-Burgemeister (Amsterdam, 2015), 74–77, no. 14.
11. A *kraamheerenmut* is incidentally also featured as a joke in Steen's *"As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young,"* ca. 1668–70 (Mauritshuis, The Hague), in which the oldest man in the family wears the cap.
12. See John Ingamells, *The Wallace Collection: Catalogue of Pictures* (London, 1992), 351–52. The man making the gesture also has the trademark facial features of the artist, a comic self-portrayal often featured in Steen's paintings. On this topic, see Perry Chapman, "Jan Steen, Player in His Own Paintings," in *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, ed. Guido M.C. Jansen (exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (New Haven, 1996), 11–23.
13. Jasper Hillegers, in *Salomon Lilian: Old Masters*, by Jasper Hillegers, Peter C. Sutton, and Wendela Wagenaar-Burgemeister (Amsterdam, 2015), 77, no. 14. Hillegers further cites the comparative example of a contemporary comic poem in J. Smeerbol, *Bruylofts-konst* (Amsterdam, 1650), 190. The poem, dedicated to a newly married couple, Jasper and Grietje, warns Jasper about the impending costs of childcare, including items such as a porridge pot, blanket, slotted spoon, and spool.
14. Steen played upon the theme of *kattekwaad* (cat's wickedness), a contemporary term referring to the mischievousness of children, in several pictures, including his *Children Teaching a Cat to Read*, ca. 1665–68 (Kunstmuseum, Basel), and *Children Teaching a Cat to Dance*, ca. 1660–79 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

Provenance

- Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, Naples, Florida [to Salomon Lilian].
- [Salomon Lilian, B.V., Amsterdam.]
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2006.

Exhibition History

- Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art, "Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection," 14 September–31 December 2024, no. 16 [lent by the present owner].

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- Marx, Lizzie. “The Delights and Displeasures of Smell in Dutch Genre Scenes.” In *Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden* Collection. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady and Diane Sewchuk, 21. Exh. cat. Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art. Albany, 2024.
- Nogrady, Elizabeth, and Diane Sewchuk, eds. *Delights of the Senses: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life. Featuring Paintings from The Leiden Collection*. Exh. cat. Albany, Albany Institute of History & Art. Albany, 2024, 72–73, no. 16.

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